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OPINION

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Spy dust — the whys and wherefores

THERE are two ways of handling matters such as the "spy dust" affair.

One way is to do it quietly, behind the scenery.

Among great powers wishing to live on reasonably civilized terms with each other this is the normal way.

If one country is doing something in the spy department which the other considers excessive, the quiet response is to take the appropriate foreign minister, or ambassador, aside, and say, "Look, Anatoly, this is too much. You will have to call your boys off or we will turn our spys loose with more and better dust."

The other way is to go public and use the affair to whip up public resentment against the other country.

Washington chose to go public with the charge that the Soviets have been sprinkling a traceable dust on Americans in Moscow, the better, presumably, to follow them around town and identify their Soviet friends and sources of information.

The context of the announcement makes interesting reading, as follows:

Aug. 19. The White House national security adviser, Robert C. McFarlane, made a speech in Santa Barbara, Calif. In it he discounted the likelihood of major improvement in East-West relations at the scheduled summit in November. He said it would require major change in Moscow positions and attitudes.

Aug. 20. The White House staff at Santa Barbara announced that the US will proceed with the testing of antisatellite weapons.

Aug. 21. The State Department in Washington issued the "spy dust" story.

Aug. 22. President Reagan made a Republican fund-raising speech in Los Angeles in which he stressed his determination to go ahead with his Strategic Defense Initiative ("star wars") in spite of Soviet objections.

Put it all together and it makes a public policy statement. It says, in effect, "Yes, we are going to meet the Russians in Geneva in November, but don't worry. We know they are bad people who do bad things. We are going to go right on building all the new weapons we can and we don't expect to make any deal with them when we get to Geneva."

This is a message of reassurance. It is addressed to Mr. Reagan's own constituents of the New Right who are in a state of deepest anxiety about the inclination of his foreign policy. They have been unhappy for a long time over what they consider to be his betrayal of their idea of "conservative" values. They are horrified now as they watch him head down the road toward meeting Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in Geneva.

Only the latest of Mr. Reagan's many mistakes, in their eyes, is to have agreed to meet the new Soviet foreign minister, Eduard A. Shevardnadze, in Washington Sept. 27.

New Right spokesmen and essayist Norman Podhoretz, in a column in the Washington Post of Aug. 12, stated the case that Mr. Reagan backs away from his convictions with the following:

"Three vivid cases in point are his refusal to use serious economic pressures in support of the Solidarity uprising in Poland; his decision not to retaliate after the attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut or the hijacking of TWA Flight 847; and the moves he is now making toward a restoration of détente (under a different name, to be sure) with the Soviet Union."

What we are witnessing in the sequence of tough talks from the White House is the domestic political side of Mr. Reagan's climb up the rocky slopes to the summit. His agreement even to meet and talk to the head man in Moscow is, in the eyes of his New Right constituents, a terrible thing to do.

Mr. Reagan is edging towards a less confrontational posture towards Moscow. He is being tugged back by his own right wing followers who want more, not less, confrontation in east-west relations, and bombs in Lebanon, and a roll back of the Iron Curtain in Europe.

As he climbs he reassures them by saying, in effect, don't worry, this probably isn't going anywhere.